

You're **Dead** After School

Andreas Gripp



[Inside Front Cover]

You're Dead After School

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You're Dead After School

and other poems

Andreas Gripp

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You're Dead After School

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Author's Note

Out of the 41 poems herein, 35 have been newly written in 2023 for this book. 6 are either new, recent, or older and have previously appeared elsewhere, possibly in earlier versions: *The Banality of Bananas*, *Nine*, *Ode to Olivia*, *This is the Reason*, *Neapolitan*, *Upon Our Awakening*



*I've always loved the first day of school
better than the last day of school.
Firsts are best because they are beginnings.*
—Jenny Han

Jenny Han, go fuck yourself.
—Eugene Sigmund Wemple

The First Day of School

(no it's not a misprint)

Drove past
St. Stephen's
Separate School
on the first day
of classes, for *them*—
thank *god*,
not for me.

You see, I don't feel
anxious anymore
on Labour Day
weekend, when
I used to watch
Jerry Lewis
joke and croon,
alongside Charo
or some other
washed-up celeb,

raising money for
his *kids* and *MDA*,
ones who couldn't
run or hit a baseball,

and I must have been
a jackass
way back then,

envious that *no one*
would dare to
pick on them at recess,
challenge them
to a fight,
throw a piece
of gum
at the back of their
head, already chewed,

giving a malicious
grin
when the victim
turned their face,
to see the one
who tossed it,
its saliva-goo
that stuck to their
strands of hair,

knowing it never
garnered respect—
to beat-up on
someone
who couldn't fight them
back,

and I think
of all of this
as I see a boy
getting a beatdown
by the fence,
before the first bell's
even rung,

wondering what the
year could hold
for such
a crying weakling,

explaining to his
mother
why the brand new
shirt she'd gotten
was *already*
stained with blood,

to his dad
that he never threw
a punch,
was on the ground
at 8:45am,
encircled by the
others

who gleefully
sneered,

calling him a *girl*,
that the meanest
thing you could call
a boy at the time
was a *girl*,

no, not one who's
stuck in a wheelchair,
that would be cruel,
that even future
misogynists
were considerate,

might have
pitied the kid
whose muscles
no longer work,
as they may have
seen on a
telethon

that came to a
tired close,

just the nervous
night before,
when all the bullied
of the world
were on their knees,

if they were Catholic,
for instance,
recalling the Garden
of Gethsemane,
that even God
in human flesh
couldn't bear
what lay ahead,
pleading *take this cup
away,*

mere hours
before the bleeding
would begin,
when no one
says they know you,
a rooster
rising to do
its sacred duty.

Roadkill

We've seen it coming,
since we locked our eyes
upon the pile of fur
in the distance, a mound
of fuzz and bone,
insides out and outsides
flat
from the fury of
a thousand wheels—

a pulp of red and brown,
a gleam of inky black—
with only its tail
spared the over-
and-over *squash*,
from rubber at a
frenzied speed,

and I swerve to the left
so as to keep our tires
untainted,

that I won't add
to the *indignity*
of an asphalt grave,

don't want a bit of
intestine, lung, kidney,
embedded in our Firestones'
grooves, purchased
in a virginal state,
taking us from A to B
without a second thought

until today, when you and I flash-
back to pubescent
squeals,
and our silent
supplications
to whatever *god*
can intervene—

hoping it's a skunk (but there's no
stench),
a raccoon (but no glimpse
of bandit eyes),
or even a groundhog
(we rarely see them anyway
so there's no attachment there),

anything, anything
other than a cat,
please don't be a cat,

feigning
it was only a *Gund*,
over-stuffed until it
burst,

tossed from a
rolled-down window,
in the guise of giving it
freedom—

to fly,
to see what really lurks
within the forest,
edging the I-75,

with Knoxville
just a molehill
far behind us.

After the Eclipse

It's there,
in our walk around
the crescent,
the sign a golden
diamond:

*Blind
Child
Area*

one that's weathered
from the elements,
from the creep
of rust and age.

It's *been* here
long enough
for the kid to be grown-
up,

and now we
look around us
left and right,
spy the houses
and their trees,

the veranda
on which he sits,

in the vivid
imagination
of our minds,

tinted Ray-Bans
on his eyes,
their black *opacity*,

in his lap
an open book,
the white of
pimplly braille,

perhaps a 19th-
century classic,
or the latest from
Stephen King,

subduing his depression,
his lack of intimate
sex,

his hearing
sharp as ever,
as it was when he was
six,

right after he
lost his sight,

when the footsteps
of the aphids
piqued his ears,
the wings of moths
to follow,
even spiders
threading webs,

and now,
if he could sense us,
the heaving
of our breath,
the thump
of our assumptions,

bursting
through our chests
like the roar of an
atom bomb,

the flash of which
would blind us
unless we looked
the other way,

as we'll do in just
a moment,
when we think we've
seen him waving
from a porch,

the one on which
he rocks,
wistfully,
cacophonous
amid the quiet.

The GOAT

It happened in the
pitch of a bleat—
the horns a crown
of triumph, no more
a sign of shame,

never again
to be blamed
for a loss—

a one-
eighty *turnabout*,
to the Greatest
Of All Time—

the strikeout
at the plate,
the goal between
the legs,
the fumble
in the end zone
long forgotten,

replaced by
Wimbledon wins,
the most
Lombardi laurels,

a sextet of
Stanley Cups,

making you
wax poetic
on the *baa!*
at recess time,
when the ball
inside your glove
had squirted out,

that a bell
around your neck
was apropos,

brought in
by the farmer's
daughter,
a behemoth
of a girl
who would have beat you
to a pulp,
unless you meekly
slipped it on,

damning you
in the eyes of
the Shepherd,
Whose statue
graced the schoolyard
long ago,

the One who selects
the sheep
at the end of time,
from the goats
who are destined
for the flames,

Who'd up and left the
ninety-nine
to search for the one
that was lost,

no wreath upon
its head
nor confetti
raining down—

without a trophy
or a plaque
that boasts its name.

The Banality of Bananas

The bananas we bought at the grocers
are all bruised. Half-an-hour ago,
when we placed them *gently* in our cart
they were immaculate, blemish-free,
their green beginning to recede
in favour of a yellow that says
they're ready for the kitchen,
like September's supplantation
of the summer's verdancy,
foretelling leafy floating
to the ground.

Like the seasons, we reprise the same
scenario every time, pick these
phallic tubes of potassium
just days before their peak—
and every single week we bring them home
they mirror a boxer
who's duked it out
with raging Big George Foreman.

As a child, you tell me you bruised easily,
whenever you bumped your arm
against a door, knocked your knee
upon a table end, were hugged
with too much gusto
by your great-aunt Filomena.

You've avoided shorts and t-shirts
as you don't want folks to misconstrue
your patchy black and blues,
worried I'll be glared at
by every woman passing by.

But back to our bananas—
I suggest we bring some bubble wrap
the next time we do our shopping—
sheathe them in swaddling plastic,
croon them off to slumber,
lift them *tenderly* from the shelf,
carry them with care as though we had
two feathered arms, like the proverbial
stork of old who brought the babies
to their parents
with never a single mark.

First Crush

It's called a *crush*
because that's exactly
what it does
to the bones
within your chest,
the push and crack
of your ribs,
the impaling
of the heart within.

It's a *crush*
of young euphoria,
an overload of
senses, ones which rip
your child-brain apart,

and you'll bruise
at the sight of her smile,
swoon at the lilt of
her voice,
be severed into snippets
when she reads the
note you wrote,

clumsily
confessing
your adoration,

in a crayon's
shade of red,

her discarding
in the refuse
what you thought
was your very soul,

redundantly
mashed and ground,
in the maw
of a garbage truck,

the one that
rumbles
every week
along your block,
quashing the *pulse*
of every bird
that trills of love.

Nine

There's a beauty to our numbers
that I note with admiration:

the shape of cipher 6
and its curving, crescent close;

8, with its weaving, double loop
that skaters strive and scratch to mimic;

3, and its ability to complete,
to divide as trilogy, to *manifest*
as Trinity;

1 which finds the wholeness
in *itself*, never wishing to *flee*
its core or essence,
for the sake of multiplying:

*One times one times one
will always equal one.*

2 is the sum of love
and the most romantic of all
our digits,
and in terms of teaching math,
it gives a break to all our children:

*Two times two is four,
and the answer's the same
when adding.*

7 is Biblical,
the time for God's creation,
the length of telling tales
of *Harry Potter*,
of *Narnia*,
the complement of 12.

5, the Books of Moses,
the fingers and thumb
on our hands,
giving us ability,
the gift of grasp
and molding, making shapes
from slabs of clay.

4, a pair of couplets,
the voice of poems
and song, the rhythm
and march of the saints.

Yet when I come to number 9,
my spirit starts to sink:

it has such *lofty* expectations,
aspiring to reach new levels,
only to fall so painfully short –

missing the mark of 10
by just a meagre, single stroke,
always being known for
“almost there,”
remembered for the glory
it could have gained
but never got,
its cousins –
19, 49, 69 –
bearing the brunt
of all its failings.

99 is but a stepping stone,
a grating *lapse* towards 100,
a number we only *watch* while it rolls,
a humble *countdown* to celebration,
unable to give us merit on its own.

I spent all of '99
yearning for 2000,
anticipating a new millennium,

the fears, excitement
we thought awaited us
in a dawning, changing world,

never enjoying the year for what it was,
practicing the writing
of an exotic date –

January 1, 2000

and eager to see
the masthead of that early morning paper,

ridding myself of the nines
that only accentuate defeat,

thinking I'll *pass* some kind of threshold,
a singing, flowered archway
bidding *come, enter,*
leave what troubles you
behind.

Mariupol

You say you're making
borscht
for my birthday,
adding cream
the way
my mother used to.

Nothing beats beets
I say, a tired quip
I've used a hundred
thousand times

and I wonder if the
dying and the dead
in Mariupol
savoured a steaming bowl,
the cabbage and the
pork afloat in stock,

before the
bombs and missiles
struck,

before a walk
to the theatre
perhaps,

the one the Russians
would upstage, with a
blast not in the script,
that blood would seep
like the red
of a root in soup,

the one we've shared
from generation
to generation to
generation to
gener—

who are all these
demons
who *say* we never
were? That the
recipe
was *theirs* all along,

who supplant our
language and our flag
and steal our children
to sing of *Putin*,
Sataná in our tongue,
who I'll curse with
every swallow,

every tang
that's on my tongue,
forgetting about
my birthday
and the jests
I considered funny,

back when we could
laugh within our boundless
fields of gold,
the blue above our heads
without a blotch of white
in sight,

the soil beneath our feet
still calm and sober,
before sottish
on the spillage
of our veins,

as it was
when Stalin
made us starve,
made us count
our varied bones
in shadowed light.

Seventeen

The kids
are all awash
with *unalive*—

*she'll unalive
herself if she
can't transition*

*he was unalived
while jogging
by the cops,
running laps
around the avenue
while Black*

and I think
I kinda get it,
that *suicide*
is so passé,
will alert the
algorithms,

and to *kill*
so indifferent
and abrupt,
a paltry *syllable*
from the *Book
of Exodus*,

that it's a case
of *lexical innovation*,
as someone smart
had put it,

conveying
as with a glass
that's gone opaque,

one their parents
and their teachers
think is just another
mirror,

one inclined
upon reflection,
until the jump-scare
you've been waiting for
appears,

the girl who's
rotting
while she stands,
head *tilted* to the
side as if she'd hung
in English gallows,

the one you say you saw,
while engaged
with your *mascara*,

and not the darkening
of your lashes but the *boy*
you tell the other girls about,
on TikTok and in texts,
whose *wand* was something
less than you'd expected,
that you'd laughed until
your eyes were running
black,

thinking you've never
felt so alive
since you were born.

Aquatics

*Can you cry
underwater?*

the click-bait
write-up
asks me,

well, poses
the question
to *you*,

who've gone
further down
than I have,
in the nearby
lake and ocean,

swum in the
deepest end
of every pool
since you were 8,

and you concur
with the premise
of the essay,
say your face
was soaking wet,

and not from
H₂O,
but from the *grief*
discharged
from your ducts,

that it was the *only*
place you could
find
to let it go,
the fish *indifferent*
to your wailing,
the tremor of
your limbs,
the scream
they couldn't hear—

or the weeping
that you did
after plunging
off the board,
knowing few
could hold their
breath as long as
you,
knew the figures
that you saw
were shoulder-down,

no open eyes
in sight,

that none could
decipher *tears*
from all the beads
that dotted faces,

knowing you're not
allowed to cry
in summer sun,
even if your uncle
who had touched you
shouts *Marco! Polo!*

under the guise
of being playful,
that he's
only setting *free*
his inner child,
like your father
always did
until he couldn't
touch the bottom
with his toes.

Not Another Fucking Poem About A Bird

You ask me
what kind of bird
we see aloft,
darting between the
branches and I say
I haven't a clue,
I'm not an orthodontist,

and *that's* the day
you told me I was daft,
that a person
who studies the birds
is called an
ornithologist,

that at 13 years of age
your set of braces
brought you scorn,
before your jaw
was wired shut
and it was nothing
but milkshakes
for days,

then the cavities
ran amok
and your parents
were strapped for cash,

saying you had
to earn some money
to pay them back
when you got older,

putting to use
the camera you'd been
given Christmas day,

taking snapshots
of the birds
around your house,
won a prize
for one
that was shown
at the Western Fair,

could tell an Osprey
from an Eagle
a mile away,
a Bunting
from a Blue Jay
when it rained,

that you've always
felt affinity
for them all,

not because they could
fly or sing like
everyone expects,

but that they're
perfectly content
without the teeth
like ones you lost,

so long ago,

no dentures when it
becomes too late to
salvage,
their smile
a beautiful thing without
dentition,

never stopping
their daily feasting
on the seeds,

gliding between
the trees
without a single
care in the world.

Fruit Flies

They appear
before I've taken my
first sip of wine,
alcoholic bastards,
and sure, it's more like a
swig but I have to get it down
before the upturned sight of
legs has put me off, *ruins*
another glass of
Beaujolais,

and yes, I could take a
strainer
to fish them out,
unsee the pair of wings
afloat like an orange
safety jacket, as if flaunting
their buoyancy—
in the repose of the
Dead Sea,
or maybe Utah's
Great Salt
Lake,
where the Mormons won't *touch*
fermented grapes,
the imbeciles,

or are they *prudent*
instead of prudes—

know it's fucking pointless,
that these tiny, flying pests
won't simply *stop*
at nectarines,

that once they've had a
quaff
there's no getting rid of
them,

that no matter the climate
you're in
they appear in the wink
of an eye—or is it *blink*?
See, I can't even write
a decent poem about it
all, despite how subtly
I pop the cork,
pour this purple
fountain in my mouth,
foregoing the fancy
glasses and drinking *straight*
from the bottle's nape,

the one they'll soon be
swarming like their cousins
do a corpse,
sucking out the sweetness
in that season of decay,
the one between

fruit-and-vine
flesh-and-bone

that I continue to
deny
with every swallow
of my throat.

“Skinny Minnie Miller”

We tend to feel bad
for *the fat kid*,
the comparison
to whales and hippos,
the earthquake jokes
and *thunder thighs*,

while the skinny
boy in the desk
near the window
has also heard it all:

the human toothpick,
bag of bones,
the *eat a sandwich!*
said a hundred
thousand times,

that he can slip into the crack
between the doors,
the ones which lead to the gym,

the girls in
stiches
whenever it's
shirts and skins,

saying they can't
tell him apart
from the *shaft*
of his hockey stick,

that the kids can wrap
two fingers around his
wrist, that he's come to
dread the summer,
the taunts at the swimming
pool,

and if he thought public
school was cruel,
grade nine will be a
hellscape, the acne *rising*
across his face
as if pushed *up*
from tectonic plates,

a range
of red mountains
that will disfigure
a gauntly smile,
when he'll ask a *dozen*
girls to dance,

on a throbbing
Friday night,

their callous *no*
that come with snickers,
not the chocolate bar
to blame
for his bumpy visage,
or the one he
should devour
to put some flesh
on his skeletal frame,

but the laughter that's
heard when you're no longer
human, when your clothes
forever sag,
when you're sarcastically
asked
of *Auschwitz*,

that you should get on with it
already, find a lanky shovel,
dig your fucking
grave, climb right into your coffin,
the one with plenty of
room to spare.

Forgetting the Glasses

I've just showed up
to this reading without
my glasses,

the pair I spent
four-hundred fucking
dollars on, from which
I wiped away the
smudges
before I left,
and like an idjit

forgot them on the
counter, noticing
the roads looked rather
blurry on my drive,
to the library
I was destined,
too late to turn
around

since I'd squandered
too much time
on my rehearsal,
a last-minute
tune-up of my set,

and now bursting
into this room,

chairs all filled
by the *other*
poet's friends,
the one who's actually
published, her photo on
the poster very polished,
unlike the bed-
headed snap
I'd submitted
weeks ago,
the one with thick-
rimmed glasses on,

but none of that
means a thing,
because this shit-show
must go on
and I'm due
up to the mic
in half-a-minute,

out-of-breath,
deleting the joke
I was planning to tell,
as an ice-breaker,

a preamble
to the poems
now out-of-focus
on every page,

and I begin
to stumble over
all the words,
deciphering little
of the text,
butchering the
cadence I'd been proud of,

squinting like a
mole that's in the
sunshine,
for the very
first time,
wondering *why*
it spent its life
beneath the ground,
bumping into the
turns of dirty tunnels,
missing *out*
on the morning song
of ascended birds,

and I'm thinking
that's cliché,
a piss-poor
metaphor,
or is it a *simile*
I read as *smile*,

those gathered
in their seats
surmising
I'm dyslexic,

or perhaps the
innovative genius
I fantasize
about,

with my *orioles*
now the *Oreos*,
my *meadowlark*
the *mellow dark*

in which my *dream*
is read as *cream*,
the one between
the wafers if it
made some sense at all,

not the
vulgar polonaise
of love and lust,

that the coup-de-grâce
of *blood* instead of
flood, detained for
just a moment
by my breath,

kept them ever-guessing,
wondering what-the-
fuck it meant,

that even *you*,
my erstwhile
detractor, said
it was the greatest
poem of mine
you'd ever heard,

asked how long
I'd worn the
contacts,
if my optician
was avant-garde,

had grown weary
of rhyming couplets,
considered the
chart upon the wall
a beatnik poem,

one that Olson or
Orlovsky,
drunk as they
may be,
would've nailed
in the blink of an eye.

You're Dead After School

You're dead after school:
the four words you never
wanted to hear as a kid—
feeling that recess at least
brought a teacher out for
yard duty, but a 3:30 threat
was the sentence of a beatdown—
an inflated lip, crimson nostrils,
an eye or 2 encircled
by the swell of midnight blue,

and it wasn't just the dread
of blows to come,
it was the promulgation of it all,
how a throng of kids would
surround the two of you,
the ruffian and his prey,
watch your ignominious
defeat, your failed attempt to
keep the tears at bay, someone's
he's crying for his mommy
birthing laughs from the girl
you love,
wishing she hadn't seen
what's yet to happen,
while it's 3:26 pm,

and yes, you keep looking back at the
clock on the classroom wall,
glances that *avoid* the burly boy,
clenching his white-knuckled fist
in the palm of his hand
as a message to you and your fear,
of the havoc he'll wreak on your face
in mere minutes

without anyone to come and help you,
unless you take the *chicken's* route:
raise your hand in the air
at the teacher, desperately,
tell her *Bobby's gonna*
beat me up,
if there's a way that she can
stop it, take you under her
wings in a way
your *mother* never could,

knowing it's more
humiliating
than what awaits you at the bell,
the kind of ring that never
leaves your ears, even generations
later when the shrill of the oven
startles you, tells you to intervene,

that your lasagna will be blackened
in a hurry,

sauce spilling
from the pan like the
blood which had molted
from your nose,
on that day you violently
fell,

got up, then fell
a second time,

without you landing
the proverbial punch
that *knocks* the bully out,
in every
bullshit
movie concerning *school*
you've ever seen.

Waiting to Die

I haven't been living.

I've been waiting to die.

—Captain Jean-Luc Picard

You compose the
epilogue first, reveal
the story's end,
backtrack your way
to why you braided
the rope in the first
place, called it
a Gordian knot,
frayed from possibilities,

like the one
she utters *yes*
and takes your hand,
where love
supplants
your loneliness,

where it's a
maternity ward
you visit
instead of a grave,
so many decades
later,

the one that's
overrun,
where nettle
and their sting
replaced the *roses*
that would have been,
the prick and blood
a sign you're still
alive, thorns a tender
garland
for your head,

your rising
every Sunday
to the glory of the
day, from the bedstead
built for two,
her breath upon the
mattress
an *allegro*, one
your barking *dog*
could never offer,
in all the years it
failed
to fill her space, *be* a
worthy muse
for every poem.

Ode to Olivia

I'll sign my pseudonym to your confession,
echo expletives in overture,
regretting the passing through birth canals,
staging reenactments
of the favourite, precious moments
from the history of Hillside High:

How they tore your dress
in ribbons,
keeping snippets as souvenirs,
your weeks of toil
on your mother's machine
all for fucking naught.

And when your face broke out
in acne,
you'd said it was a case of hives,
caused by the stress
of obligations,
that your father fell behind
in clipping coupons,
your brother
caught on tape in tights
your former friend forsook,
that, and the rest of memorabilia,
home to spiders making nests
in all your letters penned to boys.

Now no one writes by hand:
tapping emojis on their phones
or clicking left on a plastic mouse,
while those annoying ringtones
clench your fists and badger
your Spock-like ears,
hearing *I just called*
to say I love you
on the cell of a passer-by,
thinking *Superstition* would have been
a better choice,
something Stevie's not ashamed
to say he sang.

You know I never thought you *fat*,
that *unibrow*
was a dumb-ass word
from the kids rolling grass
in the pit, near the schoolyard,
while the principal turned his nose
and feigned congestion.

You cry that kindergarten
was a *kinder* place,
that cruelty, though innate,
had yet to fruit and flower,
still covered in inches of ice.

Let's go back to the monkey bars
and hang upside-down
while it snows,
feeling flakes
melt on our faces
as the blood goes rushing to our heads,
suspending the law of gravity
or pretending to the world that we *can*,
on any given moment, without notice—

deferring our death if we want to.

Sister Doreen

paced up and down the rows
between our desks,
yardstick in her
grasp, ready to rap
the knuckles of our hands,
should we dare to grin or
sneer, fail to pray *Hail Mary*
without the reverence
She was due.

Behind
the school at recess,
we surmise
she's never had sex,
been a frump since she was
eight, wouldn't know a
condom from a balloon.

She greets us back
with a snarl,
ever-scanning for
mockery,

bellowing *wipe that stupid
smirk
off your face!*

And that's the moment
when you did it,
took a napkin from your
pocket,
dragged it *across*
your curling lips,
your mouth then a rigid
line, like the *pews*
at Sunday Mass,
or the cross above
the Confessional,
in which you'll enter
the day before,
offer remorse
to the forgiving
Priest,

who'd met the Sister
years ago, when she was
a *postulant*,
one who took a binder
to her breasts,
a practice
she began at
13 years, after her
father began to fondle
her in the dark,

shoved his hand
between her legs,

in front of Mary
cloaked in blue
upon the wall,
who later offered
solace, a place
where she was shielded
from the touch,
where the only
naked man
she'd ever see

was nailed above her head,
in wood and then in
gold around her neck,
unable to lift a finger
in the night.

This is the Reason

I've never written you
a love letter, as I did for the girls
I crushed on in school,
vowing a childish *forever love*.

I've been told that *both*
can never truly be promised,
there are too many variables
upon which they can falter—

an unexpected loss
of mind and memory,
the foreboding phantom
of infidelity,

that our lifespans
are simply too long,
the decay of what we were
befalling while we breathe,

that the warbler outside my
window, his years but a
jaunt through junior high,
says it better,

his skyward pledge
to his treetop mate
daily putting me to shame.

Contractions

I say our spell check's
rather daft
to underline in red
my use of *amn't*.

I am not impressed
when you tell me
it isn't valid,
despite the Irish
lips that speak it,
adding it's a stunt,
to inflame
the English snobs,
the ones who lift
their crumpets in the air,
sing *Charles is our King!*

Amn't I your girl?
Joyce in *Ulysses*
came to write,
and none would dare
to insert an
erratum slip,
citing it as *err*.

You're not in Ireland
now, Boland as a
girl was told
when she sprung the word
in class,
immortal now in verse
she penned
without a second thought,

as will I, in a poem
that even you'll
refuse to read,
unless I *write*
a second draft,
for a sharp-eyed
London editor,

who has never set a *foot*
in Cork or Dublin,
one who knows a typo
when they see it.

Longing for Charlton Laird

The best thesaurus
I've ever had
(and yes, I'll admit
that I use one,
that I can't
fire off
five-hundred
thousand words
from the front of
my fucking skull)
is a *Webster's*
New World
Thesaurus

by Charlton Laird,
2003 edition,
one I had to tape
like a doctor
closing wounds
on the battlefield,

and I've been
hunting
for an updated
version ever since
(though mine *boasts*
it's "completely new" —

a one-time truth
now faded lie),

well, sleuthing
as far as
bookstores
will allow,
and that a google
search will take me,

only to discover
Charlton died
in '84,

making me wonder
how he'd done it,
invoking *synonyms*
while in a coffin
(or as a forlorn
heap of ash
in someone's urn),

figuring
what to say
in place of *life*—
though life *itself*
had slipped
on through his fingers

(well, if he still
had them that is,
boney as they'd
be).

I feel as if
I should name him
as co-author,
of all the poems
I've ever scribed,
knowing some
of the searing verbs
belong to him,

that I might have
uttered *heart*
instead of *pith*,
if not for his suggestion,

old rather than
seasoned,
which may have
caused my wife
a bit of offense,
the spark to end our
marriage,

though I might have
won her back
with my *enchantment*
in lieu of *love*,

that my little extra
effort
regained her favour,

a sprinkling
touch of magic
from the pages
in my hand,

that I've never
believed in ghosts
until today,

his sibilance of
nouns
providing rescue,
from another
tired lyric,

his antonyms
a warning
to watch my step,

that what I'd thought
was a flawless term
is in fact
the *opposite*,

that I'll die from
embarrassment
if I use it,

join him in that great
Athenaeum in the sky,

our conversations
locked
in pregnant pauses,

each of us
trying to conjure
the perfect word.

The Mona Fucking Lisa

After a single session,
I already regret my *sign-up*
for this ekphrastic poetry
course, cursing to you
the assignment I was given:

*Mona Lisa, the fucking Mona
Lisa, like that hasn't been done
a gazillion times*

and yes, I won't be able to fake it,
that everyone and their mailman
knows her visage,
are well-versed in da Vinci's flair,
and their lofty expectations
will be something I can't deliver.

You ask me what our poet friend was given,
the one who always gets the lucky breaks,
and I tell you the *Voice of Fire*,
three lines of blue-red-blue,
vertically trite and prosaic,
that no one's ever heard of Barnett
Newman because he sucks,
that I could have scrawled a sonnet
on my kindergarten days,
on a pair of simple colours,

how the Gallery
had been fleeced in '89,
caught up in the avant-garde,
how 1.8 million
could have gone to help the homeless,
paid for their chalets
and pedicures, covered
the cost and tip
for their tortellini
Bolognese;

but as it is,
I have to *sleuth* my way
behind that Delphic smile,
invent a tale of Giocondo,
that Leonardo
tried to paint her
minus mirth and maturation,
in 1499,
when his subject began to sob
from pent-up grief, reliving the death
of her baby daughter,
his *Moaning Lisa* a work of art
the Renaissance ignored
(bathing in their beam
of erudition), that even Machiavelli
said *chin up, she needs a grin*;

that when the *time*
arrived to try it all again,
da Vinci made a jest,
a side-splitter, that Lisa barely
smirked at his ill-timed droll,
that he hadn't a clue
how it felt to love and lose,
consumed as he was with
innovation, invention,
his maps and magnum opus,

failing to heed
the red of blood and life,
her blue, blue mood.

Revision

They say you can never revise a poem
too many times, edits abounding
like the brood of a mouse
who's lived in our walls for a year,
the one you wouldn't kill
because of the adorable twitch
of her nose.

I disagree, feel Ginsberg's
first thought best thought
should rule the roost,
that if you sit upon the eggs
too frequently
they might break,
leak a yolky mess
and you rightly say
it's a piss-poor metaphor,
desperate I am to
include the figurative language
literati yearn to read.

When you hack away at a stanza
once-too-often, you can strip it of its
essence, its caught-in-the-present-
moment sort of thing our sensei
tries to teach us, when we're cross-
legged on the floor beside his feet,

noting that he never
goes back to retract
a word relinquished,
from his smiling, contented lips,
that it's *not* a feather's sway,
a superfluous descent of down
that only hindered
perfect flight.

Poems aren't written, you've heard,
they're rewritten,
and neither of us know
the bard who said it, proving my point
that they may have overdone it,
crippled couplets with an axe
when a chisel was more befitting,

or Michael Jackson's countenance,
bungled by a hundred plastic surgeons,
admitting he looked rather cute
in the days of *Thriller*, but creepy
as fuck by *Invincible*,

at a time he had to tape his nose in
place, that it had fallen from his face
when he endeavoured an umpteenth
take, of a song that's never ever
made the light of day.

Sébastien

The artist exhibiting his work
in this dingy, downtown gallery
paints nothing but bowls of fruit.

Maybe he has some other
themes in his vapid repertoire
but all that's here
from wall to wall
are bowls of fucking fruit,
ones so dull and trite
he should have handed us
espresso as we browse.

In a whisper,
I ask you if he's ever read
the news, notices the homeless
in their rags a block away,
a mother selling her body
near the stoplight, kitty-
corner to where we're trapped,
unwilling to cause this dilettante
offense,

that we're pressed
by etiquette
to act like we're
enthralled,

eyeing every
stroke, insipid tint
and tone,

that we'll be obliged
to tell this boring hack he's great,
we'd *love* to take his card,
maybe purchase something later,

but before that dénouement,
here's a banal bowl of apples
to make us think
life's peachy-keen,

forget the Black youth
gunned by cops—
here's a pair of
avocados

and the Residential
"schools"—
bananas have never
looked better

please don't speak
of genocide—
the plums still have
their pits

and the earth getting
hotter by the hour—
see the orange
and its arc,
how fresh it looks
in my vessel,

its sweetness in my mouth
once I've put my brush away,
kissed the photo of my wife
snapped a day before she died.

Ennui

I'm bored.

This would be
a terrible time
to scribe a string
of words.

It might be better
if I depicted
my mood as *ennui*—

then at once
I'd pique some
interest, from both the
writer (that's me) and the
reader (that's you)

but maybe not, that the
word's been used
en masse,
in a slew of
poetry chic,

that it's
trendy to slip it in,
our scrawls
without a muse

though we could say
it's the current *zeit-*
geist, leaving us at the
periphery

which all sounds
kinda cool, but still a *bore*
nevertheless,

that it's the proverbial
worse-than-death,

whereas the end of life
births epics, sagas,
ones to last millennia

while my staring at the wall,
at paint that's been
dry for years,

is hardly
conducive
to legend,

unless a Frenchman's
ghost, invoked,

the one who coined
the term,

on a week
he sat *alone*,
watched the sloth-
like ascent of grass,

before he could
summon
the word to describe it.

Neapolitan

It's not Napoleon, I was told as
a kid, digging my spoon into the
swirl of chocolate, strawberry,

a vanilla that was never “plain”—
though if you liked it best
you were considered a very
boring person, unlikely to
smoke a joint, down a 26er
straight-up, have sex by
seventeen.

When we studied the French
Revolution, we were asked
what we'd choose
if we could:
the blade or the noose—

hanging, I'd thought
but never said, because I'd
still be one and whole.
The guillotine would be quicker,
yes, the pain of a single second,
but the detachment of head
from the neck seemed unappealing,
as was the pour and pool of blood.

*Don't ask my mortician
to do more than what is
necessary, I think out of le bleu,
over forty years later, hearing the bells
of Dickie Dee through my
window screen.*

*Thread and needle
could never handle
that kind of job
or was it *Vive la France!* and what
the fuck does it have to do
with ice cream, again?*

Organisms

He'd done it *first*
in grade 9 Bio,

the teacher
having asked him
to read aloud,

a simple
paragraph, really,
from the *text*
we had to lug
with us to class,

where he cleared
his throat
and faltered,
four syllables
said as three:

orgasm,
describing as
sexual climax
the microscopic world

and doing it in quick
succession:

orgasms all around us

billions of orgasms

*orgasms we're unaware
of*

the kid you'd
least expect it from,
the trademark
thick-rimmed glasses,
an awkward
gait in the halls,
sitting by
himself
in the cafeteria,
eating a peanut-
butter sandwich
and never looking up,

or perched in a
library cubicle,
a pic of
himself
that someone drew

staring him in the
face,

elongated
bulge

in the space between
his pockets,
a sideways
Eiffel Tower
in his trousers
crudely scrawled,

a result of an
election
he'd announced
as an *erection*,
over the PA,

regretting he *volunteered*,
when the cheerleader
looked for takers,
on behalf of her
principal mom,
a girl who made him
blush, redden
head-to-foot

and again,

over thirty years
hence,

spoke it while
reading his poems,

in front of a
grinning
crowd of people
only there
for the *other* poet,

the one who writes
of trees,
how tall and firm
they stand,

suddenly
overshadowed
by this aging, mousy
upstart,
who never raised
his eyes
from the printed
page,
put out by a
vanity press,

stammering
at the reception
that he'd never
sold so many
books in all his life.

L'ordinaire

There are times
like the present
I can't think of
the right word,

mot juste
you describe it,
which in itself
makes it a
challenge,
the D-minus
I got in
French
only adding to
my hesitation,

my speech *stunted*
in its tracks,
like the girl
too afraid
to come out of the
locker, y'know,
the *Itsy Bitsy*
Teeny Weenie
Yellow Polka-
dot Bikini song

we thought was
lame when we were
kids,

and the analogy
is equally dumb,
you reply,
saying the girl
was in fact
an exhibitionist,
strutting proudly
on the deck
of the pool,
feigning humility
in the novelty
tune,

that hers was a
developed ass
and she knew damn well
that it swayed,
breasts a swelling
fruit—no, not the “melons”
used ad nauseum
but a pair of
pomegranates
(fuck you, Solomon!),

that jiggled
when she jumped,
upon the diving board,
a tanned, flat stomach with
the best belly-
button in the world,
disappearing
into the chlorine,
while you sat
near the fence
looking down,
at your set of
unpainted
toes,

and none of this
has *anything* to do
with my speechless-
ness, my gasping
for breath

and to think of a
kinder word than
mediocre,
for the painting you
spent a month of
Sundays on,

the portrait of
yourself along the
water, as a tween,
at “muscle beach”
they called it,
your eyes having
dropped, looking for shells,

the ones they say
you can hear the ocean
within, the ones that
declare *you’re beautiful,*
please hold me,
don’t leave me to be
downtrodden in the sand

and I simply can’t
affirm it,
don’t want to
lie or crush your feelings,
much like the time
you said you loved
me and I could
only manage *ditto,*

trembling, tongue-tied
plebeian that I am.

Ashton Pete, Motherfucker

flipped the last-to-
first, *the first shall be*
last and the last
fucked up the ass

he'd say, f-bombs
aplenty, smoking
like a 21st-
century Lévesque,
seeking Cohen's
old haunts
in the bricks of Montréal,

found the alley
where the poet
took a piss, allegedly,
the greatest
shrine of all, he once
told me, bidding
the Parti Québécois
to put up a plaque,

said they wouldn't
do it, the poems and the
songs were *en Anglais*,

and he had
a set of rules
all his own,
sucked in the
final smoke
Morris Philip—
Philip Morris—
had to offer,
before *forced* to let them
drop, his fingers singed,
refusing to
squander a puff,

knowing with
cancer of the mouth
he'd *be* much less profane,
wouldn't *cause*
his mother to blush,
wouldn't grunt
so hard and loud
when eyeing her stash
of *Penthouse* porn,

for the articles,
she once told him,
as if their positions
were reversed,

the day he *caught* her
on the sofa
with her knees
a sideways yawn,

just a yoga stretch
my dear,
and he never
knew *what* to do
with his hard-
habit-to-break,

no, not the *Virginia*
Slims, or the center-
folds he dug the staples
from, but the speaking
down and dirty,
from beneath the dampened
sheets, always renting
in older buildings
with 12-inch walls
between the suites.

The Conductor

You tell me the love
of your life was a
conductor, giving
no details
except his name,
Henri,

that you said your
goodbyes in the
midst
of a foggy night,

and I play a
pair of scenarios
in my mind:

envision your tears
on the platform,
recalling Bogart
watching the plane
in *Casablanca*,
Henri taking his position
at the front of the
train, pacing down
and up the aisles,

ensuring the tickets
are valid and the final
whistle's blown
in *au revoir*

and the wild-haired
maestro, frenetically
waving a baton
in front of the
Orchestre de Paris,

that the puffs of
white ascending
spoke of fire,
from the heat of
an affair
about to end,

or maybe just the
prank of a pair
of boys, lighting
firecrackers
in the vom,
timing it to the
crescendo of
Tchaikovsky's *1812*,

or perhaps a little
of both, Henri
leading the
dining car attendants
in a chorus of
Frère Jacques,
the steam from
freshly basted clams
causing a welling
in your eyes
as Marseilles
swelled larger
in the distance,

where you stepped
off the tracks
all alone, save the
canary in the
cage you carried
with you,
scolding it to be
quiet, that you never
liked the lines of
Dormez-vous?

since being forced to
sing it solo
in grade-four French,
Monsieur LaMère *incensed*
you were out-of-key,

that he'd heard a
better version
from a parrot,

given him
one day
by a man who
shovelled coal
throughout his life,

had bought the
wrong bird,

couldn't name a tune
he might have whistled
in the dark.

Barky McBarkface

is mailing it in today,
his half-assed *ruff*
a far cry from his
usual barrage of
WO-WO-WO-WO-
WOOFF!!!

when his teeth
are keenly bared,
sharpened by the
years of crunchy bits,
his tongue a hanging
sock that's soaked
in drool,

and we've been
grateful
for the window
that keeps him in,
on his human's
upholstered couch,
intimidating
any who venture near,

who worry he
might smash right through
the glass, devour the flesh

right off their bones,
ones he'd calmy
chew
come the slaughter's
epilogue

but not *today*,
his head barely
lifting from his
post, where his daily
sentry duties
have kept the neighbours
on their toes,
literally—

a ballerina's step
to check the mail,
a soft and trepid
creeping to the car,
an *exhalation*
once they've locked
themselves inside,
repeating the
scenario
but in reverse,
when they've returned
to their driveway
with a gulp,

but for *us*, on our
pleasant constitutional,
the one he *normally*
interrupts,
we worry that he's
sick, that decrepitude
and wear
have settled in,

that we *won't*
know what to do
come his passing,
won't know what to
speak of
when the birds are
melancholic,
when the air
is dense with sweat, the
clouds a brim of black
before they spot us,
walking 'round the bend,
a *flash* and peal
of fury to be unleashed,
one that scares us
shitless, warns
us to keep our distance.

Summer Spins

Spotify recommends
to me its “Summer
Throwback” playlist,
featuring Katy Perry,
Rihanna, and Drake—

not the Beach Boys,
Diana Ross, and the
Seals and Crofts
I expected.

They obviously think
I’m hip, wouldn’t know
a Discman if I sat on
it

and young enough
to know what’s hot
on Netflix,

sporting the cool
of the ChiSox
logo—

not the old
English D
on my Tigers
baseball cap,

and now I
understand
how our grand-
parents felt,

walking into
the record shop
in a fruitless search for
Crosby—Bing, not David
of CSN—
Andy Williams and
Doris Day,

the counter-guy
in his Lennon shades
withholding a
beckoning sneer,

leading them to
the 3'x2'
receptacle,
where albums
went to die,

a hospice for
the likes of
Rosemary Clooney—

yeah, George's
aunt, you know,
the guy from ER,
on NBC or
whatever-it-was,

no, not the streaming
show on Twitch
on which they twerk,
but the one you had
to press the remote
to watch,

an upgrade from the
getting-off-the-couch
to change the channel,
when you sometimes
had to extend the rabbit
ears,

your *hand*
raised in the air
to catch a signal,
to see things
clearly,

taking the pose of
a Roman sculpture,

a toga-wearing man
forever frozen
in his youth,
one who would have
heard the lute of yore,
its *strum* a song
that's never
out-of-date.

Rude Ronny Jones

Our friend
you say is vulgar
wants to take us
out for coffee,

the one who
solely identifies
with maternal lines
alone,
saying *you're only
in your father's
balls for hours,
your mother's fucking
womb
two-hundred-and-
eighty days,*

and you wish he
wasn't so blunt,
saying *I gotta
take a shit
instead of excuse
me, I need to use
the bathroom*

and at least
he doesn't lie,
tells it like it is,

will let you know
there's snot
inside your nose,

and yes,
he'll point out
what's unlovely
in our world,

makes no *bones*
about *BO*,
asks *ya haven't*
heard of Speed Stick?

while sniffing his under-
arms, tells *you*
to do the same,

and he'll slurp
his choice of brew, burp
between the bites
of apple fritter,
get up
from his plastic
chair,
says *I gotta*
shift my dick

and we recall
his dad was graceful,
well-mannered,
the result of
growing flowers
for a living,

knowing he clearly
takes after
his mum,
forced to work in
sewage
to make ends
meet,

complaining
about her *cunt*,
how it itched
while getting dressed,

who missed out
on all the birds
of early morning,
squashing worms
beneath her boots
on days it rained.

Milk Duds, or I'm Tired of Your Bullshit

I've grown weary
of the sound
of your straight-
faced fables,
your serious
intonations,

like when you said
the pitcher on the mound
is known as Jesus,
pronounced in the
English way,
that he hides *stigmata*
with the black of
Tensor wraps,

or that *Let's Call the
Whole Thing Off*
had an addendum
Gershwin penned:

*You say hurray
I say hurrah
You say okay
I say okah*

that Fred and Ginger's
version
had been cut,
like the deleted
scene
you say you saw
in *Citizen Kane*,
when Orson sings
a ditty,

that *Milk Dud*
turned to *Rosebud*
when Hershey
changed to Hearst
for caricature,

and you should have
taken time
to dig a little
deeper,
that Hoffman was the
original chocolatier,
that no one says
okah,
that "Jeesuz"
is always "Haysoos"
with Hispanics,

or the moment
that you told me
Malcolm X
was Malcolm 10,
a Roman *numeral*
appellation,

that he'd grown jaded by
the *Little* epithet,
applied by slavers
of the past,

that he'd soon be
larger-than-life,
with a mentor called
Elijah,

no, not *that* one,
the prophet riding a
chariot to the sky,
but the one
firmly grounded
on the earth,

the one Allah
had told His deepest
secrets to,

the proper *meaning*
of every surname
under the sun.

Clumsy

A local critic of lit
has used *clumsy* again
in another disparaging
review.

He's done it eight
or nine times before—
his go-to word of
dismissal:

*the poet's clumsy
cadence,*

*the novelist's
clumsy prose,*

*the writer's clumsy
research.*

Maybe he grew up
watching Chaplin
or Costello,

scoffed at their
bumbling trips,

the slip of dishes
from their hands,

their inability
to make it through life
without a stumble,

and projects it onto
the author that he's read:

the blot and smudge
of the pen,

an errant stroke
of the key,

a dozen
clichés uncovered
with every turn
of the tired page,

knows *Oopsy the Clown*
wasn't humourous,
his humongous
checkered shoes,
his big red ball
of a nose,

that after all those years
of performing,
he should have ditched
the olive green, left
the top hat
to Astaire,
the daisies for the poet
sighing *she loves me*,
she loves me not,

inscribed by an
inky quill
that's never spilled
a single drop.

Spoken Word

I definitely feel out of place,
at this late-night poetry
slam, over 30 years older
than this crowd of teens and
twenties
who are speaking
their bitter truth:

the fracture of relation-
ships, the lines of intersection,
narratives
of racist taunts
and kicks
to the fucking head
(from the anti-queer brigade),

and it's not that I can't relate—
fag! tossed my way
from all the kids
now grey with age, playing
sudoku by the fire
but that's *another* shoddy
poem I'll likely write—

for within this present moment
Naomi has hit her stride,
hooking me along
with her inflection,

familiar as it is,
an echo of a hundred thousand
poets who rarely glance
upon a page,

or don a pair of glasses
sliding down
along their nose, one that's
burrowed in a book
these flashy vogues
have yet to read,

and her eyes are seared in mine,
perhaps wondering
why I'm here,
so straight and pale a visage,
so Luddite
without a phone,

that I've likely never heard of
Twitch and TikTok,
knowing that I'd be lost—
especially in the latter,

where every word's a beat,

every syllable
always locked
in recollection,

where youth and fleeting beauty
pirouette,
in the shadow of a *bomb*
that's failed to show,
for generations,

of which poets
abandoned birds and blooms
to howl against its menace.

The Weather

We realize at this instant
that the entwining of our
thoughts has come undone,
in perpetuity,

in a moment you
remarked about the weather,
the trading of cloud and sun,
a *peekaboo* of sorts I would've
wrote

but *too* many poets
have said it, in their lines about
the sky, its mutability,
ones scribbled
in lieu of love,

when their beloved
is unable to inspire,
when kisses are
chaste and clean,
a going-through-the-
motions like the constellations
do,

when we tire of their patterns,
their formulaic pose
in evening skies,

when Scorpius
and Libra
have nothing more to say,
to us and to each other,

a hush from which
the rain will give
reprieve,
in its soaking of our
clothes, in its thrumming
on our roof,

that a discussion
on our shingles
will be birthed,
that our dryer's
full of lint,
that the percussion
which we hear
reminds us of
applause,

ones noted
at the end
of a symphony,
the Mahler number 9,
through *which*
we listened
attentively,

relieved by
social graces
that beseech our
lasting silence.

Anniversaries

This couple
in the news just
marked their 82nd
anniversary,
each over
100 years of age.

There's no *designated*
gift by which
to mark it,

60 and its diamond
being the last
one on the list.

We ourselves
had started off
with paper,
a pair of
simple poems
inscribed on bond,
breezed past
wood and copper

and now *aluminum*,
a bat from
childhood,

when they said it
doesn't break
or give you splinters,
knocks the ball
up over the fence.

We look ahead
to crystal, knowing
I *can't* afford to drop it
on the floor,
eternal klutz
that I am,
that it's much
more fragile
than all that came
before it;

likewise the
set of china,
denoting
our distant 20th,

knowing we'll
be *far* behind
the aforementioned
couple,

on their 92nd
swing around our star,

reporters
taking snapshots
of their dinner
in candlelight,

one that casts
their shadows
on our walls,
as we mark
our silver, pearl
and jade,

from 40's ruby
to 50's gold,

cognizant
we can't catch them,
no matter our *efforts*
to never fight,
make love
8 days a week,
as the Beatles
once had crooned,

have a toast
with Ponce de León,
ask him what he
thinks
of these modern
day Methuselahs,
forced to be creative
with their presents:

casts of
footprints
from the moon,
a twinning of
Martian rocks,
pebbles
scooped from
Saturn's
grandest rings,

the ones which they had
visited
after running out of
treasures on the
Earth,

flying
in a rocket
made of vellum,

a billion *sheets*
that they'd been
saving
since their initial
celebration 'round the sun.

“me too”

When I tell you
I love you
you answer
"me too"

and perhaps
I misconstrue,
that you love
yourself
like the
affirmations
advise,

the ones we
see on Instagram,
that Rupī Kaur
is full of them,
churning them
out
like some poet in
a fast food
window,

where you pick
up a side of
"you're better off
without him"

plus some
platitudes
on the rain
to wash it down,

or maybe
"me too"
is a memory,
in the (not so)
recent past:

an abusive ex,
a diddling dad,
the gymnastics
coach who always
held you snug,

checked out your
ass
instead of your
landing,
after vaulting
and parallel bars

but then
I've always
read too *much*

into your
words,
thinking there's some
story
below the surface,

a recollection
that encircles
like a shark,
that you're afloat
in a punctured
dinghy
awaiting rescue,

by an aqua
knight who rides
the seven seas,

one who sees
a kraken
where there's not,

thinks "right
back at you,"
"ditto kiddo"

is the beast
of a thousand
fathoms
he's come
hastily
to slay.

Upon Our Awakening

Upon our awakening,
you ask why males
want sex
first thing in the morning.

It was merely a kiss
on your arm.
You read a tad
too much
into it,
not *good morning love*,
did you sleep well?
but *dear god*
I need to fuck
like a dam about to burst
or that final moment
on earth,
when you only have seconds
to live,
before the fabled flash of light,
then cinders.

Superheroes

I drew comics
when I was ten.
Sloppily drawn,
as I had no talent
for anything visual
(hence you're
reading a *poem*
instead of gazing
at a painting
on a museum
wall
I bribed the
curator to hang).

Out of all the super-
heroes I created
with my trusty, 2B
pencil, *Lion-o* was my
favourite:

a flying lion,
wings atop his back
and gliding over
the Sears Tower
in Chicago
(the tallest building
in the world back
in '74),

or I should say,
what was *supposed*
to be the Sears Tower,
friable façade
that it had.

Of course, I didn't
realize that a flying
lion had been done
before, that there's
one called a *gryphon*
(same thing as a *griffin*
but I don't want anyone
to confuse it with the
Poetry Prize
I'll never-ever win),

though it actually
sports an *eagle's*
face,
so it's not a
direct case of
plagiarism,
though I couldn't
breathe a sigh of
relief,

recalling that
every Christmas
I'd watch *Rudolph*
the Red-Nosed
Reindeer,

would see the
scene where the
airborne lion—
attired in a crown
and majestic mane—
sailed in the sky
to his castle,
his wings
allowing him to
search the lands,
for the un-
loved playthings
of the world,

bringing them
to the *Island of Misfit*
Toys, where Rudolph
and Hermey the Elf
were *misfits*
among misfits

but I must digress,
take this moment
to confess that
Lion-o was indeed
a rip-off of that
Rankin-Bass
creation,

that *Rudolph*
was released in
'64, while I lay
in a crib with a
mobile of circling
creatures
above my head,
like a lamb
or a pup
or a kitten,

a full decade
before my Lion-o
was doing his
own kind of saving,
not of measly
dolls like the cowboy
who rides an ostrich,

but *people* who
really need it,
such as the poet
too drunk with
despair
to notice the train
that will hit him
from behind,
because he's too
wound-up with his
literary failure
to realize
he's walking the *tracks*,
by Union Station,

that he's had it
with the Windy
City, its bitter cold,
its howl off the lake
and multiple murders
by the day,

though he'll get a
totally
different perspective
once he's aloft,

by a pair of
outstretched paws
that scoop him up,
by the dent of
his armpits,
into a sky that's
bleak and mottled,

taken to a place
that's always warm,
sunny, secure,
where *no one*
was an outcast,
even if their nose
was all aglow,

as much a
paradise
as an un-
gifted child
could depict.





The author of various books of poetry, as well as one of short fiction and another of photography, Andreas Gripp lives in London, Ontario, with his wife, Carrie.

[Inside Back Cover]



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Poetry

I love your craftsmanship, your sense of rhythm, and deployment of consonance and assonance and internal rhyme. It's poetry after my own heart, poetry that dares unabashedly to be beautiful when discussing hard things. Poetry that knows that rolling your car and landing upside-down in a ditch gives you a new perspective on the ground above and the sky below.

Richard-Yves Sitoski, Owen Sound Poet Laureate 2019-2023

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